

Howard's American Magazine

Devoted to the
Educational, Religious,
Industrial, Social
and Political Progress
of the Colored Race

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Mr. Lincoln's Letter to a Sorrowing Mother

A COPY of the following letter of Abraham Lincoln written to a Mrs. Bixby, of Boston, has been engrossed, framed and hung in one of the Oxford University (England) halls, as "a specimen of the purest English and elegant diction extant."

DEAR MADAM :—I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

Abraham Lincoln

By HON. ARCHIBALD H. GRIMKE

IT seems to me that it is high time for colored Americans to look at Abraham Lincoln from their own standpoint, instead of from that of their white fellow-citizens. We have surely a point of view equally with them for the study of this great man's public life, wherein it touched and influenced our history. Then why are we invariably found in their place on this subject, as on kindred ones, and not in our own? Are we never to find ourselves and our real thought on men and things in this country, and after finding them are we to deny to them expression, for fear of giving offence? Are we to be forever a trite echo, an insignificant "me too" to the white race in America on all sorts of questions, even on those which concern peculiarly and vitally our past, present and future relations to them? Is it due to some congenital race weakness, or to environment, to the slave blood which is still abundant in our veins, that we rate instinctively and unconsciously whatever appertains to them as better than the corres-

ponding thing which appertains to ourselves, and count always what we receive from them, although vastly inferior in quantity and quality, as immensely superior to that which we give in return? Are we never to acquire a sense of proportion and independence of judgment, but must go on with our brains befuddled with the white man's prodigiously magnified opinion of himself and achievements? I hope not; I do most devoutly pray not. For if we are ever to occupy a position in America other than that of mere dependents and servile imitators of the whites, we must emancipate ourselves from this species of slavery, as from all others. And the sooner a beginning is made in this regard the better. With whom then can we more appropriately begin this work of intellectual emancipation than with Abraham Lincoln, the emancipator? It will, therefore, be as a member of that race for whom he performed, incidentally, the grandest act of his life, that I shall now speak of this illustrious man.

William Lloyd Garrison told the following story of himself and Thomas Fowell Buxton, the once noted British abolitionist and member of Parliament :

"On arriving in London, I received a polite invitation by letter from Mr. Buxton to take breakfast with him. Presenting myself at the appointed time, when my name was announced, instead of coming forward promptly to take me by the hand, he scrutinized me from head to foot, and then inquired, 'Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Garrison of Boston, in the United States?' 'Yes, sir,' I replied, 'I am he, and I am here in accordance with your invitation.' Lifting up his hands he exclaimed, 'Why, my dear sir, I thought you were a black man. And I have consequently invited this company of ladies and gentlemen to be present to welcome Mr. Garrison, the black advocate of emancipation from the United States of America.' I have often said that that is the only compliment I have ever had paid me that I care to remember or to tell of! For Mr. Buxton had somehow or other supposed that no white American could plead for those in bondage as I had done, and therefore I must be black!"

It is the universal vogue now to sing the praises of Mr. Lincoln, and I too will join heartily and without stint in all merited panegyric upon his greatness, but I do not believe that his most enthusiastic admirer would claim for him such praise, as is implied in the above story, and which belongs justly to Mr. Garrison.

At no time before or after his election to the Presidency, was Abraham Lincoln a friend of the slaves in the same sense, as was William Lloyd Garrison, or anything like it, for a simple and sufficient reason.

Mr. Lincoln did not take part broadly as a man, in the slavery struggle in America, but rather as a white man, and more particularly still as a white man belonging to the non-slaveholding section of the Union. The abolition of slavery was never his life purpose, which was, as it related to this subject, limited strictly to restriction of the evil to the Southern States, and exclusion of it from the national territories. Like the great majority of Americans he entertained in the abstract, for the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence, unmeasured respect and veneration, yet when it came to conduct, those self-same truths were powerless to affect his action, any more than if they had been mere "glittering generalities." His devotion to the Constitution, with all of its slave compromises, amounted to idolatry, and for the Union with its shameful inequality and oppression of the blacks, he felt the most passionate attachment, as to the acme and *summum bonum* of everything worthy and wise on earth.

The right of the slave to freedom had no more practical weight with him, or with the North, when set over against the peace or prosperity, or preservation of that Union, than would have had, if such a thing was possible, the right to freedom of the imaginary inhabitants of Mars. What was true of Mr. Lincoln was emphatically true of the section of the country represented by him, with a few shining exceptions, such as the old abolitionists, for whom alone the principles of the Declaration of Independence possessed any practical moral obligation or value. The Negro as a human being did not count with the people of the North before the war, any more than so many cattle, and since that time, he has not counted with them as much as so many aliens. It is as a social or political factor that the North has ever allowed itself to think about the Negro, or to act in respect to him, and then only when his existence happened in some way to touch injuriously its pocket or its power.

There is no doubt whatever that during the first year of the war, and of Mr. Lincoln's administration, that he was bent on saving the Union without liberating the slaves. He was strangely slow and reluctant to change his policy on this question, strangely averse from abating one jot or tittle of the laws on the national

statute book in favor of the masters. He had set out determinedly to maintain the Union with slavery, and in the pursuit of this purpose he turned, during that time, neither to the right nor to the left. On July 17, 1861, for instance, a general order was issued from Washington that "Fugitive slaves will under no pretext whatever be permitted to reside, or in any way be harbored, in the quarters and camps of the troops serving in this department. Neither will such slaves be allowed to accompany troops on the march. Commanders of troops will be held responsible for a strict observance of this order." A few days afterward, the administration, through its Attorney-General, reminded the United States Marshals of Missouri that the Fugitive Slave Act must be executed! General Fremont's order of August 30, 1861, freeing the slaves of rebels in the Western Department, was promptly countermanded by Mr. Lincoln. And to General Butler's famous suggestion that "able-bodied Negroes, liable to be used by the Confederate government, were *contraband of war*," the Secretary of War replied that "It is the desire of the President that all existing rights in all the States be fully respected and maintained."

The slaves, in these circumstances, had no more chance of freedom with Lincoln, while this mood of his lasted, than they had with the head of the Southern Confederacy. It was the stern logic of events which forced the President to change his mood and abandon his original position. When he struck slavery at last, his primary object was not to free the slaves, but to save the Union. But here is a parable :

Once upon a time there lived together on an island five brothers, who made a compact with one another to occupy and govern the same, in common. Two of these brothers dwelt in the southern part of the island, and three in the northern. They seemed to be happy and kindly affectioned toward each other, for they had recently risen against the unjust rule of an elder brother and expelled him from the island. They had thereupon established for themselves a constitution—equal rights, equal laws and an equal voice in making the laws. But to all this beautiful fraternity and equality, there was an exception, and that was a sixth man who lived in the South, and who was the slave of the two brothers there. Now these two brothers did not work with their own hands, but depended upon the labor of their slave. The three brothers in the North, on the contrary, worked for them-

selves, and as might have been expected, the joint labor of these three exceeded in productiveness the labor of the slave. Their labor was not only greater than his in quantity, but excelled it in quality also, for they were intelligent and the slave was ignorant. Because of their intelligence they were able, moreover, to diversify their industry, and did so, whereas the ignorance of the slave incapacitated him from doing the same.

Well, these things gave to the labor of the North an immense advantage over that of the South, and the three brothers grew, in consequence, rich, much richer than the two brothers who employed slave labor. Under these circumstances there sprang up in time two social fabrics and two sets of industrial interests on the island, which naturally enough caused presently friction and conflict between the parts. Each section of the island tried to obtain possession of the law-making authority in order to protect its peculiar set of interests from the hostility or encroachment of the other set, for it was soon discovered that what in the way of legislation might be food for one, might at the same time act as poison on the other. In this political contest the North, owing to its superiority in wealth and numbers, got possession of the taxing power of the government, and used it to promote its own interests, and although it did not mean to injure the brothers in the South, its action in this regard injured them all the same.

The South, seeing the peril in which it was placed by the growing inequality between it and the North, tried to redress this balance of industrial forces in its favor by adding to its political strength. But the three brothers of the North, alive to their danger from such an addition of influence to the South, ranged themselves in opposition to the same. Thereupon there broke out a bitter quarrel between the two sides, which lasted many years. Meanwhile the anger of the brothers increased, and the social strength of the three of the North waxed greatly, and that of the two in the South fell behind that of those in the North, year after year, as the struggle for supremacy progressed. But notwithstanding the heat of the contestants, and the fierceness of the dispute for power between them, those of the North did not desire in any way to deprive those of the South of their slave. Not at all. For as often as this poor man escaped from his cruel bondage and sought refuge among the Northern brothers, they caught and sent him back into slavery. Yet in spite of this plain disposition on the part of the North to help the South to keep its

slave in perpetual servitude, the two brothers grew more and more to suspect the motives of the three brothers, and finally to hate them with a great hatred, because of their superior strength and of the use which they made of it to oppress, as they claimed, their weaker brothers on the island. So the Southern brothers decided finally to separate themselves from their Northern ones, to take their part of the island out of the old Union, and to set up instead thereon a new one founded on their right to live in security on the labor of their slave. But while the Northern brothers did not object to the perpetual enslavement of this poor man, they objected strongly to a division of the island into two parts, and to the separate and independent existence of a second government. Well, in this posture of affairs, as the two sides could not agree to disagree, for the South was fully resolved to go its way, and the North was as fully resolved to stop it, they began to fight. They fought a long time, and the two brothers of the South seemed as strong as the three brothers of the North. Two years passed, and the end of the war among the brothers was not in sight. This made the three brothers of the North very sad, for they did not like to fight. They loved peace, but they loved the old Union, and their right to the whole island, even more than they loved peace. Up to this time they had been very jealous in guarding the right of their two brothers to their slave, but perceiving then that alone they were not strong enough to conquer them and maintain the indivisibility of the island, they bethought them of calling to their assistance the poor slave, whom they had always despised and grievously wronged, to fight with them for their island. Well, in their extremity they hailed him and offered him freedom. But so little did they, in reality, wish to give him freedom, that they gave his masters instead from September to January to make up their minds to cease fighting, to abandon their design to divide the island, and to return with their slave into the old arrangement, by which the five brothers were to occupy and govern the island in common. Fortunately for the slave the two brothers laughed this offer to scorn, and went on fighting right lustily. Then as a last resort, and as an act of dire necessity, the three brothers gave the slave his freedom, put arms in his hands, and with his aid they beat the two brothers in the South, destroyed their government, and preserved the integrity of the island.

To whom think you, in the parable, is gratitude due, from

the slave to the three brothers, or from them to him? When you have guessed aright the answer to this riddle, reader, you will understand the exact part which Mr. Lincoln enacted in the freedom of the slaves, and the plain motive which underlaid and actuated his famous Emancipation Proclamation. Let us render unto him the things which are justly his, and unto the Negro and the old abolitionists the things which are justly theirs. Truth is better than error. Let us have truth!

Was Abraham Lincoln a great American? Yes, certainly. Was he one of the greatest of American statesmen? Yes, assuredly. Was he a great philanthropist? No. Was he a great friend of human liberty and the Negro, like Garrison, Sumner and Phillips? No, a thousand and one times, no! For the sake of truth let us answer "yes" every time where "yes" agrees with the facts of history, and "no" where simple honesty forbids any other reply. And then let us be done, once and forever, with all this literary twaddle and glamour, fiction and myth-making, which pass unchallenged for facts in the wonder-yarns which white men spin of themselves, their deeds and demigods.

WASHINGTON, D. C., *January, 1900.*

The Psalm of a Race.

By JAMES D. CORROTHERS.

Written for HOWARD'S AMERICAN MAGAZINE.

I.

Tell me not there breathes a mortal,
Whom an all-wise Maker gave
Sense and reason, but to foretell
Him created a mere slave.

II.

Races differ, but are equal:—
Since the flight of time began,
Each hath been some other's sequel
In the forward march of man.

III.

Up! my comrade; do not waver,
Tho' you be of trampled race,
Claim your birth-right, without favor,
'Till the *world* shall give you place!

IV.

Rise on visions sent to win you
From your languor and duress;
By the hope that lives within you,
God hath called you to success.